

BOOK REVIEW

MY KIND OF PEOPLE: ACHIEVEMENT, IDENTITY AND ABORIGINALITY.

Wayne Coolwell

1993

University of Queensland Press.

St Lucia.

154 pages

In 154 pages (24 of pictures) you could hardly expect to get in-depth biographies of 12 singularly successful people, but Wayne Coolwell comes pretty close to giving us just this in his *My Kind of People*. In fact, he gives insight into the lives and achievements of 13 young Aboriginal people if we realise that the book itself is quite an achievement. An achievement on a number of levels, not the least of which is the sheer amount of travel which Coolwell undertook to track down his subjects. They are scattered from Phuket to Perth, Melbourne to Milan, Cape York to New York. It is not free, of course, from the somewhat uncritical enthusiasm redolent of prize-giving night, and this is probably its chief fault. But there is much that is praiseworthy and for those who might still cling to stereotypical images of "unproductive Aborigines" this book will lay to rest many misconceptions. To be sure, in the account of Archie Roach's life as alcoholic, to winner of various awards including the ARIA award for indigenous album of the year in 1990, there is a recognition that many Australian Aborigines are, after more than 200 years, still suffering from the devastation of the dominant culture. But the overall impression gained is one of pride in Aboriginality and hope for a more just future. Foregrounded is the disarming honesty of many of those whom Coolwell interviews.

Aboriginality, though, has not been an easy mantle for many of the book's singers, educationists, sportspeople and others to take upon themselves. "I'm an Aborigine. Whew. I've said it. But it was so difficult to actually say those

three words". So says visual artist Gordon Bennett, winner of the Moet and Chandon award for the most outstanding young Australian artist of 1991, whom Coolwell visited in France. Not just Aboriginal artist, note. Bennett is understandably proud of this. So in this and in many other ways, a certain ambivalent complexity of identity and political direction for the future is evident. Noel Pearson, history graduate and land rights activist, sees all Aboriginal pursuits as being bound up with his "people's political struggle". Television personality Stan Grant is not so sure as to just what the struggle is about any more.

Underlying what drives many of these high achievers, though, is a determination to do something for their own people. Ironically perhaps, rarely does this desire take the form of actually working with other Aborigines. Overwhelmingly, it is seen in terms of opportunities to bring Aboriginality up-front, proud and confident both in terms of what it means to these young people personally and what it can mean to the broader community of Aborigines and other Australians alike. As Ernie Dingo puts it, "I take my Aboriginality with me all the time". And he does not just mean colour, for there are many shades of black represented here, and indeed shades of language (for Shirley Nirrpuandydji, school principal of Gapuwiyak in Arnhem Land, English is only one of a number of languages). But given this, and perhaps even because of it, Coolwell has put his finger on a certain unifying, underlying, at times illusory Aboriginal essence which informs the book.

Despite some stylistic inconsistencies (Dr Sandra Eades, for example, virtually writes her own chapter) this book is warmly recommended reading if you want to gain an insight into what the Aboriginal future of Australia is increasingly likely to be.

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